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COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE: WELFARE QUEENS AND THE
INFRAPOLITICS OF BLACK HAIR TUTORIALS ON YOUTUBE

BY

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To the Black Women out there strugglin' and survivin'

Keep on keepin' on

This is for Ya'll

Introduction

“Welfare Queen,” is a phrase that many understand in our society without fully understanding its implications. Some describe a welfare queen without using the phrase explicitly. She is single, she has children, she sucks resources out of the state, and she is black. This phrase has been extended to other women of color that are believed to fit these descriptors. In this paper I will most often describe a welfare queen as black. The origins of the phrase and the state’s control of black women’s bodies as a result (or really as a means) of the phrase are tied in inextricable ways. The condemnation of welfare is an attack on black women and their bodies (Roberts 9). Namely, their reproductivity and labor (Roberts 9). The pathology of the welfare queen is incredibly salient in society and many have explained why that is the case. What I am more concerned about is how black women decide to combat this specific oppression. A desire to escape the welfare queen trope while simultaneously trying to survive by receiving welfare benefits is a position that is not conducive to self-love. Trying to resist while also being pushed to receive aid by conditions of oppression is an exhausting position and I want to know how black women engage in political acts under this system.

To answer this question, I will focus on how black women take care of their hair and engage in online communities while doing so. The history of black hair is one of struggle and resistance. Black women’s hair is a site of oppression and can thus be political. This is demonstrated by in the ruling that said the decision not to hire a black person based on their hair is not labeled as discrimination (*EEOC v. Catastrophe Management Solutions*). For these reasons, I think analyzing hair as a political tool is vital to answering my question.

I will begin by outlining the scholars that have contributed to the analysis of welfare benefits and their effect on black women. I will also use Robin Kelley's analysis of black working class life in the 20th century (Kelley 8) to help me understand black women's haircare as a political act. To many, the effort that black women, particularly poor black women, put into taking care of their hair seems ridiculous. However, haircare can be centered in self-love and humanization, taking on a political nature. Robin Kelley provides the theoretical framework of infrapolitics, which will be useful for my project. I will use this concept of everyday acts as political acts as a lens to politicize the actions of Youtubers and viewers in the black hair Youtube community.

My analysis will include 3 themes, self-love, struggle and contestation, and intergenerational learning. I will use these themes to focus my infrapolitical analysis of the black women in the Youtube videos to highlight the political work that is being done. Beyond the invasive nature of welfare benefits and the ways that the government has inserted itself into the lives of poor black women, it is important to discover how black women survive. Virtual communities are formed in these online spaces in which black women are eager to share their knowledge and are eager to learn. Beyond hair, these communities serve as places where black women exchange affirmations of love and confidence. In many ways, these black hair communities on Youtube serve as safe spaces for women to heal from trauma associated with their hair and find pleasure.

Most of all, what we see happening in Youtube black hair communities is more than just resistance. It is political because, it is ultimately about a struggle to gain control over an aspect of our bodies that society has attempted to control. It is about maintaining power over our bodies that is trying to be taken away through the welfare queen trope.

The black women in these videos may not be “welfare queens.” What I attempt to demonstrate is that the accuracy of the label does not matter. Attempt to control black women’s bodies affect all black women. The point is that the welfare queen trope is not an accurate description of poor black women but a tool the government uses to achieve a certain goal. It does not matter what black woman is affected, what matters is the oppressive outcome. I seek to demonstrate that by engaging in black haircare, these women are not being frivolous and shallow, but are doing very important political work without even realizing it. The welfare queen trope need not be accurately applied for me to make my case. What fuels the welfare queen trope and other tropes used to harm black women is misogynoir. Thus, all of the black women in the videos that I talk about have the potential of being welfare queens in the eyes of the state because white supremacy controls through perception and not accuracy.

Literature Review

The welfare queen trope has been politically useful for republicans and democrats alike that were unsatisfied with New Deal welfare policies (Haskins 1). Welfare before the 1996 welfare reform law was viewed as violating American work values (Haskins 2). In 1996, TANF or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families replaced AFDC, the new deal welfare program (Haskins 1). TANF placed a two-year limit on the amount of time a family could receive welfare benefits and also required welfare recipients to look for jobs and work (Haskins 1). This was a major turning point in the history of welfare reform as many republicans resented the liberal policies that were a result of the New Deal and the Great Depressions (Haskins 1). However, the welfare queen trope had meaning long

before the welfare reform of 1996. The “Moynihan Report” released in 1965 by Daniel Moynihan is perhaps among the leading voices in the reinforcement of the welfare queen trope. As a politician, Moynihan undertook the task of analyzing poverty, blaming black culture for poverty in black communities. In particular, he focuses on single black women that are the heads of households as a cause of the lack of growth that happens in the black community (Moynihan 1965). Admittedly, he does talk about the long lasting effects of slavery and how that has led to conditions that black people face (Moynihan 1965), but he does not adequately address structural inequality and racism.

Moynihan focuses heavily on the dissolution of the black family as he talks about single parent households (Moynihan 1965). He claims that single parent households increase “welfare dependency,” reinforcing the trope of the welfare queen and the myth that single black women with children are always and inherently reliant on the system to take care of them. Moynihan also argues that having single parent households takes a toll on the children. He claims that they learn what they see and are likely to continue issues of poverty and single parent households (Moynihan 1965). Moynihan then attacks poor black women’s fertility by making the claim that children are often reproduced more rapidly in lower income households which also prevents the parent or parents from furthering their education (Moynihan 1965). Essentially, Moynihan equates poverty with high rates of reproductivity, pushing the fallacy that welfare queens continue to have children because each child increases the amount of welfare received. He writes, “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and,

in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (Moynihan 1965). Moynihan blames the conditions that some black communities live under on households headed by single black women and pushes the belief that this affects all black people. Even those in the middle class that live in close proximity to lower income black neighborhoods (Moynihan 1965).

Since Moynihan’s report, others have extended upon Moynihan’s work to either revise it or make his arguments stronger. Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill wrote a paper about the decline of the American Family and propose solutions for how “to stop it” (Haskins and Sawhill 2016). They too focus on comparing black families to the white traditional family structure of having two parents and children after marriage. They argue that single parent households are taking a toll on little boys because they are being raised without fathers which later leads to their failure and inability to get married (Haskins and Sawhill 2016). They also argue that the differences in success between white families and black families began in 1960s due to limited job prospects for men and the ability of black women to rely on welfare (Haskins and Sawhill 2016). They don’t buy the argument that slavery has caused long lasting generational affects (Haskins and Sawhill 2016).

Beyond job prospects and welfare dependency, Haskins and Sawhill are convinced that there is something cultural that causes black people to experience poverty (Haskins and Sawhill). For this they compare the marriage rates of Latinx folks and blacks. According to Haskins and Sawhill, if Latinx marriage rates are higher than black marriage rates when Latinx folks are just as economically disadvantaged then there must be a cultural reason why so many black families are single parent households (Haskins and

Sawhill 2016). While Moynihan does not only focus on a cultural deficiency as the cause of poverty in black communities, Haskins and Sawhill believe that welfare is an enabler (Haskins and Sawhill 2016). They point birth control as an answer to help reduce reproductivity in black women (Haskins and Sawhill 2016). Some other authors that argue along the same vein are Charles Murray in his Book *Losing Ground*, and Ron Haskins' "Moynihan Was Right: Now What?"

Other scholars respond to this argument by focusing on institutional racism and structural barriers as a cause of poverty in black communities as opposed to blaming the experience of poor black people on false pathologies. Robert J. Sampson argues that Moynihan was talking about a tangle of inequality that lead to poor conditions in some black communities (Sampson 2009). In *Blaming the Poor*, Susan Greenbaum attempts to challenge the use of poor black people as scapegoats, but she continues to focus on the significance of single parent households that are run by black women (Greenbaum 49). Others, such as Maxine Zinn, place more of an emphasis on the system.

In her article "Family, Race, and Poverty in the Eighties," Maxine Zinn attributes the creation of poverty among black people to opportunity structures as opposed to a culture of poverty (Zinn 864). In her analysis, she points to changing economic structures that have contributed to the marginalization of black people (Zinn 864). This, she believes explains why rates of marriage among black people are lower (Zinn 865). Marriage does not make sense without economic stability (865).

The Harvard Law Review released an article in 1994 entitled, "Dethroning the Welfare Queen: The Rhetoric of Reform." This article raises some concerns about the rhetoric used to promote welfare reform and the reinforcement of the welfare queen trope

(Harvard Law Review 1994). This article attacks the language used to describe welfare mothers arguing that it is more to incite anger than address real policy concerns (1994). One issue that the article discusses is that it is cheaper to live off of welfare than have a low paying full time job and have to pay for expensive childcare (1994). The solution that the article suggests is subsidized childcare, to increase women's ability to hang on to their jobs (1994). This solution however, does not address the real problems of forcing black women to take low paying jobs while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that welfare payments allow women to live in luxury.

The institutional need to have low paid labor and control black women's bodies is reflected in feminist analyses of welfare. In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts outlines the history of the welfare queen trope and the way in which the welfare queen trope has worked to control black reproduction in order to maintain racial distinctions (Roberts 9). Birth control has been historically used as a tactic to try to prevent poor black women from reproducing. Roberts explains, "...peaking in the 1970s, government-sponsored family planning programs not only encouraged Black women to use birth control but coerced them into being sterilized" (Roberts 56). This was made possible by making Norplant (a tube with hormones that is inserted into the arm) and other contraceptives available to women on Medicaid (Roberts 210). The belief that poor black women are overly fertile and attempt to suck resources out of the state works to repress production of children in the black community.

Other tactics to control the reproduction of black children included criminalizing having children out of wedlock and also having children while doing drugs (Roberts 214, 150). Sometimes judges could rule that black women be required to have Norplant inserted

(Roberts 150). Roberts explains that this shift began to particularly occur when black women were no longer viewed as cheap labor (Roberts 214). Sickle Cell screening also became a tool used to convince black women not to have children (Roberts 258). Women that were found to have the sickle cell trait (one found disproportionately among black people) were told they shouldn't have children even though there is a difference between having sickle cell and carrying the trait (Roberts 258).

Roberts focuses on the specific attempt to control black women's bodies while other scholars point to the welfare queen trope as an attempt to control the poor as a labor force. This includes *Disciplining the Poor* by Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram. Anna Marie Smith also talks about the sexual regulation of bodies under welfare reform in her book *Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation*.

Robin Kelley as a Theoretical Framework

The use of the welfare queen to oppress black woman has led me to ask the question, how do black women manage to survive while tactics are created to kill their body? Even women that do not fit the welfare queen trope are deemed unsafe from the corruption of poor black people and their children. I think that there is resistance and political work in the ways that black women take care of their hair and form communities around the practice. Robin Kelley's use of the concept of infrapolitics to explain the politics of the black working class in the 20th century will be a useful tool in how I analyze the Youtube black hair tutorials and the themes that I find within them.

Kelley first uses himself as an example of the ways that working class engage in political acts without even realizing it. He explains that when he was working at

McDonald's he and his coworkers did not know they were engaging in some sort of labor struggle because, "what the battles that were dear to most of us and the strategies we adopted fell outside the parameters of what most people think of as traditional 'labor disputes'" (Kelley 2). Here Kelley notes a difference between the kind of struggle that he is acknowledging and traditional forms of labor disputes or political actions. He then goes on to explain that hair was the most contested battleground and the employees at McDonald's fought to keep their hair from being ruined by hair nets (Kelley 2). While they may not have articulated why their hair was important for political reasons, it is evident that it was a crucial part of their identity. It will be somewhat evident in the Youtube videos that hair is very important to those that are a part of the black hair community on Youtube. What I want to articulate is why it is important and what purpose it serves.

The terrain that Kelly and his coworkers often fought over were cultural centering on dignity and fun; their goal was to turn their bodies into sites of pleasure (Kelley 3). Kellye's work on infrapolitics emphasizes a politics of culture that is important to examine as political work in order to understand the ways that working class black people struggled and survived (Kelley 8). He defines infrapolitics as the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that inform organized political actions (Kelley 8). Despite appearances of consent, a "hidden transcript" is created in oppressed communities through culture and daily acts of resistance in order to challenge those in power (Kelley 8). These tactics often appear in a folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural products (Kelley 8). On the outside it appears to be one thing, such as foot-dragging or stealing, but it is a part of a resistance that is taking place (Kelley 8). This is particularly

important for my project. I claim that the way black women take care of their hair and form online communities creates a hidden transcript that challenges white supremacist tools employed to control their bodies. To those on the outside, the effort and money put into taking care of a black woman's hair seems wasteful and nonsensical. In reality, these women are struggling to maintain their humanity and sense of community by exchanging practices and talking about shared experiences.

Kelley notes the importance of the ways in which existing structures of power respond to the daily acts of resistance and survival that many black people employ. He explains that those in power have, "employed immense resources in order to avoid those consequences or to punish transgressors" (Kelley 9). It is not simply that the small political acts black people were doing were completely misunderstood and ignored. Often, they are read as wrong or disruptive in some way and it is part of society's efforts to control black people's bodies to suppress these political acts as well. For example, the ways in which white Eurocentric standards of beauty and discrimination in the workplace based on black hairstyles can be read as an attempt to suppress the political significance of black women's self-care and haircare. Kelley does not only apply this analysis to his own working class life. He examines black youth culture, the young life of Malcolm X and more. His work demonstrates that a political reading of daily acts is important and applicable to multiple facets of black life.

Significance

It is very widely argued that white beauty standards are damaging to black women causing their bodies and hair to be pushed to the margins. Tracey Owens Patton argues

that white standards of beauty are damaging to black women and cause black bodies and black beauty to constantly be a space of marginalization and other (Patton 24). However, outside of this narrative many have explored the political meanings of black hair and what it looks like as a tool of resistance. Some of these authors are, Zimitri Erasmus, Paul Dash in “Black hair Culture, Politics and Change,” and Cheryl Thompson in “Black Women and Identity: What’s Hair Got to do with It?”. They highlight the struggles that black women have undergone to make their hair a site of pleasure and resistance to white standards of beauty. Black hair has also been associated with political movements such as the afro and the Black Power Movement.

What I hope to add to the conversation about the politics of black women’s hair is the community that is formed via Youtube that allows black women to participate in conversations about their hair and share their experiences. Youtube has become a space for black women to engage in resistance by educating themselves and others about practices. It also allows black women to experiment with different hairstyles and their beauty. Most of all, it is significant because the political nature of the self-love and community building taking place is so pervasive and in some cases evades the white gaze because this community is not incredibly saturated with white voices.

Analysis

I will focus on four themes to guide my analysis of the Youtube videos. These themes are that of self-love, struggle and contestation and intergenerational learning. In my analysis of these themes I will focus on Youtube videos that best represent the theme

and demonstrate the ways in which actions taken in the videos can be read as political in the context of the theme.

I will argue that self-love is a political act that can be understood through bell hooks's definition of loving blackness as political. I will then talk about the struggle and contestation that is tied to black women's hair journeys. Part of political work is struggle and there is a lot to be found in the ways that black women resist with their hair. Last, I will talk about significance of intergenerational learning as a political act. Teaching black girls to understand their natural hair at young age is important because it will save them a lot of trauma and learning that they may have once they get older. Pushing generations of black women to embrace their natural hair from an early age is inherently resistant to white supremacist attempts to place black women's hair as other.

Self-love

Perhaps among the most important political meanings of taking care of black hair is the element of self-love. bell hooks emphasizes the political importance of black people engaging in self-love in her book *Killing Race, Ending Racism*. In the chapter, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance" hooks argues that in a culture in which domination rests on self-negation, loving blackness is radical (hooks 159-161). Anti-racist work should move beyond creating sameness, rather it is useful to embrace difference and celebrate it as a part of that anti-racist work (hooks 151). The self-love and love of blackness that happens in the black hair Youtube communities is a key component of the political reading that I would like to do.

The idea of radical self-love is exhibited in a video published by Music and Beauty TV. This video, “DIY Sew in Weave – No Glue” was meant to teach black women how to do a nice looking sew in weave themselves without having to use glue to attach it to their scalp (glue is often more damaging to the hair and scalp). At the end of the video after the style is finished, Ms. Ruby (the Youtuber) advises women to “Be you, love you, and make it all beautiful” (Music and Beauty TV 12:28). On the surface, taking care of yourself and your hair is about beauty, looks, and fashion. The goal is to love the way you look. However, this encouragement to love yourself and be you is much more than that. As hooks indicates, under white supremacy black women are not supposed to engage in self-love or “loving blackness.” This affirmation, while seemingly simple to those on the outside, is a message that is reminding black women to love themselves and make themselves beautiful. In particular, the language of “make it all beautiful” is an emphasis on making space for your own beauty as a black woman. Her plea for black women to love themselves and think of themselves as beautiful is more than just a passive act. She is asking black women to push and “make it beautiful.” Black women must make space for their beauty. White supremacy does not allow this kind of space for us. This is a political call to love blackness. Beyond that, this Youtuber wants to provide the space and the opportunity for black women to love themselves and learn how to do it.

This video is not only about the hair method that is being taught. It is about making positive contributions to each other; it is about giving life to one another. About three minutes into the video, Ms. Ruby interrupts her flow of information to ask viewers to click like and subscribe if they have learned something so far (3:08). Feedback is important for maintaining a viewership. The Youtuber will not be able to tell at what

moment in the video someone has liked something. Asking viewers to like the video at this point in the video asks them to stay engaged, think about what they have consumed so far, and to remind them that they are part of a community. A community in which love, information, and energy is being exchanged. Ms. Ruby is asking black women to affirm the work that she is doing, to appreciate the work that she is doing, and in return they are reminded to “love their blackness.” Furthermore, this love community of exchange so significant because a “hidden transcript” (Kelley 8) is being created. The act of liking a video appears very simple, but in this context, it takes on political meaning. These black women are providing love and a sense of satisfaction and community to each other that is difficult to get elsewhere and political when they participate in it.

What is also noteworthy when thinking about this concept of a love community of exchange is that Ms. Ruby mentioned a few times that she had clients (6:40) while also asking viewers sharing the video with people they think would benefit from the tutorial (12:26). It is obvious that sharing this information with people is about more than making money if she is a professional hairdresser. In this instance Ms. Ruby is not treating her knowledge and skill like a commodity. It is not something for viewers to buy but rather an opportunity for her to invite more people into the community to engage in the political act of caring for hair out of radical self-love. When Ms. Ruby invites people to share the video, she is asking viewers to add more black women to the community. Efforts to maintain the community are inherently political. White supremacy also works to destroy communities of color. In some small way, Ms. Ruby, perhaps unaware, is engaging in political work by providing this source of information and calling for black women to increase the numbers in the community. If one viewer shared her video with a friend or a

family member, that friend or family member would most seek out more videos or more information. A new member to the community will have been effectively recruited.

One last very important aspect of this video is the effort Ms. Ruby makes to build trust with her viewership. Her effort to build this trust is political because it subverts the deceit that is very often a tool of white supremacy. Forced sterilization and the push for black women to use birth control to control reproduction are examples of this deceit (Roberts 56). Ms. Ruby is in the process of explaining how to do a particular step to achieve the hair style when she states, “The net is a challenge to do on your own though, I ain’t gon’ lie” (3:36). This is a moment of brutal honesty in the video. The style is supposed to seem doable and possible for people to do on their own. Admitting the process is difficult tells viewers that they can trust her because she has no problem admitting when something will be hard. This however, does not serve to discourage the black women that are in this community. She is also opening up lines of communication and making it possible for black women to believe in her video as a community site. It is not only the act of her saying that she won’t lie that creates this trust. It is the language she uses to say it. “I ain’t gon’ lie” gets rid of all the pretense that exists in white English. Ms. Ruby was making it obvious that it was supposed to be a very real moment and the fact that she manipulates her language to communicate this is political. She decolonized her speech and said something in a language that was supposed to express familiarity and be familiar to many of her viewers. Trust is important for establishing the kind of community that the Youtube videos provides. Trust must be present in order for black women to believe the advice that Ms. Ruby and other Youtubers provide. Trust must be

present when Youtubers provide recommendations for products to use. Ms. Ruby's video became politically effective when she established trust through honesty in her video.

Struggle and Contestation

Self-love and love of blackness is heavily represented in the journeys that many black women take as they learn to do and love their natural hair. The natural hair journey is also very much about struggle and contestation. Black women are struggling to figure their hair out and learn how best to take care of it. It is not only a struggle to figure out how to style the natural hair and help it grow, but the struggle also embodies the contestation over the black body. Who does the hair belong to? The comments and attitudes taken towards black hair are attempts to control it and control black women's bodies. Taking care of natural hair is also about reclaiming bodies and it is done in a non-confrontational way. The "big chop" really embodies this struggle and thus is a very political act. The purpose of the "big chop" is to get rid of heat damaged or chemically processed hair that causes straight ends in an effort to grow out healthy hair in the natural curl pattern. While I am opposed to the idea that a black woman straightening her hair means that she is trying to be white/fit white society's beauty mold, the act of cutting off straightened hair is so radical because you are cutting off white standards of beauty to be replaced by hair that is loved by no one but yourself and your community.

Youtuber Tatyana Ali published a video describing her natural hair journey. It becomes very evident that the decision to transition her hair from straight to her natural curl pattern was born in struggle. She describes her transitioning phase as a forced transition because she had to take swim classes in high school and could not straighten

her hair every day (3:54). The chlorine is bad for your hair leaving many black women to figure out how they will navigate doing their hair and maintaining its health. What is so important about this particular moment is that Tatyana admits that she did not have an aha moment at this time with a strong desire to transition to natural hair (4:29). Rather, it was a graduation requirement that was not accommodating for black hair and thus pushed her to embrace a style that would allow her to complete her requirement (4:29). The struggle is evident when she describes how irritated she was when she realized that she would have to swim every day and how unhealthy the chlorine was for her hair (4:00). While some black women do have a defined moment at which they decide to transition for various reasons, I think that the decision is not so clear and true as some may believe. I want to place this decision within the framework of struggle when thinking about it as a political act. Tatyana did not express her frustration as evidence of a political act and she most likely did not understand it that way. But she is contributing to a “hidden transcript” that contains the stories of many black women’s struggles to figure out how to best adapt to and take care of their natural hair when facing something that would affect the way they take care of their hair.

Her struggle also involved other parts of her body in an attempt to protect her hair. Tatyana used to fake her period during swim, figuring that her teacher (a man) would not care to scrutinize her claims, in order to maintain a hairstyle of straightened hair with curled ends (6:03). It is likely that this act would be frowned upon. Tatyana most likely realized that this act would not be approved but she did it so she could style hair the way she wanted. Though no one knew what was happening, she was engaging in this political act because she challenged the authority of her gym teacher and the school,

since swim was a requirement for graduation. This action represents more than just defiance and teenage girlish desires to have nice hair. She was black girl telling herself and the system that she matters.

Tatyana finally decides to make a “big chop” around 14 years old, marking a new point of transition in her natural hair journey (7:43). She made the decision at 2am as her friend was goading her to cut it off (8:13). Tatyana uses a pair of blunt scissors (she indicates that this is not a good idea) and chops off her hair (8:15). This was most likely a moment that she was building up to and her friend was the catalyst. It has become evident that her hair is important to her, yet, she made a decision that was not very well thought out. She even seems to push viewers to think harder about their decision to make the “big chop” and to do it better or right. The point however about the political nature of this video is the culmination of emotion, experimentation, and all around struggle with image, self-love, and hair styling that leads to such a moment. She does state that what she did was a “mistake” and she describes herself as “bald headed” even though she has a lot of hair on her head (as seen in the picture placed in the video), it is just shorter hair (8:31). Once she makes the “big chop,” her struggle is not over. Her hair is a contested site, a battle between her desire to do something new and get her natural curls back and her desire to look good and maintain a level of confidence that she did not have when she first cut her hair off. Feminine ideals of having long hair is obvious when she describes herself as being “bald headed” when she only has short hair. This struggle is also tied to how Tatyana learns how to love herself and her hair.

Next in Tatyana’s natural hair journey was deciding how she would wear her hair to school. She was very concerned with how she would look cute and explains that she

wished that she had known that hairstyles like Box Braids and Senegalese twists (hairstyles meant to protect the hair and allow it to grow) existed (8: 56). This moment is about Tatyana learning how to love her natural hair and find a style that allowed her to feel confident enough to wear it to school where she is subject to the comments of her peers. This was a difficult moment and most likely one that took a lot of effort, but her desire to embrace her natural curls and love her blackness won out. She resisted all thoughts about any possible bad experiences she may have wearing her natural and short hair to school. To many, her hairstyle most likely seemed like an odd decision, something that they did not understand. It was an infrapolitical decision that represented struggle but also victory. Tatyana knew nothing about what to do to her hair but she did it anyway. The realization that she did not know much about the hairstyles that could have helped her post “big chop,” denotes an absence of community, one that she is engaging by making the video. This lack of knowledge also indicates the added struggle that can take place when you do not have the help of community and the ability to exchange affirmations of love and support.

Examples of this kind of exchange take place in the comments of her video. Youtube commenter Mya Elisabeth states, “...GURLLLL! You had me crackin upppp. Go head girl you did the damn thang” (12th main comment down). Elisabeth is letting Tatyana know that she gave Elisabeth something. Humor was provided and in exchange for a pleasant viewing experience, Mya affirms the work that Tatyana did. Another commenter explains how she survived her swim class and tells a piece of her own big chop story (Youtube commenter [//Aku Cinta Kamu\\](#)). The video was not only about Tatyana sharing her own struggle and experiences with her natural hair journey, her video

become a space for others to share their struggles and tips as well. Tatyana's video does more than teach viewers how to take care of their natural hair. Really, her video does not give much haircare advice. This video is more about telling a story. It is meant to form community and share something with viewers that they may have gone through themselves. These women are creating something that white supremacy attempts to destroy and they are doing it through their struggle.

Tatyana seems to finally reach a moment in which she becomes significantly more comfortable with her short hair. She tries a twist-out (the hair is twisted and left to set and then the twists are taken out leaving a certain curl pattern) and expresses having a lot of confidence in her look (9:30). In the picture she is wearing sunglasses and is striking a pose (9:32). Tatyana does note that instead of leaving her twist-out out she still decides to put her hair up in a puff. This indicates that whether or not she liked her hair and had completely embraced it yet was contested, but in this moment her level of confidence has sky rocketed. The language she uses to express this confidence even changes. Her tone becomes different, she adds hand gestures and Black English intonations that express comfortability and pleasure (9:33). The pleasure is born out of struggle. At the end of the video, Tatyana sends messages of self-love and confidence, but she also suggests that viewers take a lot of pictures of their journey so they can look back and say, "Wow I really went somewhere, I really came from somewhere" (14:12). This is a really conscious reflection on the struggle and experience of the natural hair journey. The feelings expressed in this statement indicate hardship and accomplishment simultaneously. Tatyana is encouraging her viewers to remember what the journey was like and record it. This act would further contribute to a "hidden transcript" of black

women's natural hair journeys full of struggle and happiness. The act of remembering is itself political. Not only would black women remember the pain and struggle, but the sense of gratification would also exist as a reminder that with struggle sometimes comes success and a beautiful head of hair that escapes white standards of beauty.

Intergenerational learning

What is incredibly important in any political work is the education that is passed from one generation to the next. What black parents teach their children about their hair is important. This learning does not have to take place from verbal lessons. Often times, black women do their hair how their mothers have styled their hair, which, will eventually change over time as black women experiment. Efforts to get black girls comfortable with their hair and understand how to take care of it are political. A disconnect can take place that causes black girls to have a negative hair experience as they become socialized and understand the difference between their hair and that of their white peers.

One mom makes a video demonstrating how to teach your child to do their own natural hair (How to Teach your Child to do Her Own Natural Hair by BeautyCutright). This project teaches the child to become comfortable with her natural hair by teaching her how to style it herself. The video begins with the mom (Youtuber BeautyCutright) asking her daughter if she knows her hair type (BeautyCutright 0:01). The daughter makes a puzzled face and shakes her head, and BeautyCutright tells her that it is 4c (a natural hair texture) (0:03). This is followed by a confirmation from the mom telling the daughter that she knows her hair type (0:04). This moment comes off as a test given by the mom to see

if her daughter remembers information that she told her. The daughter appears to be young so it is perhaps expected that she may not remember her hair type or she maybe she got shy in front of the camera. However, the mom is very intentional about teaching her daughter her hair type and wanting her to remember it. She is making an immense effort to ingrain the knowledge of what her kinky hair means and how it should be taken care of. The daughter is learning more than just her hair type. She is learning how to identify what her body needs based on a difference that is not bad but something worth celebrating.

The interaction that takes place between the mother and daughter exudes love and friendship and adoration. The mom mentions that her daughter acts as though she is shy but wants to do everything she does (0:31). BeautyCutright is recognizing the kind of influence she has on her daughter. Perhaps this is what makes her believe that she can teach her daughter to do her natural hair and to love it. She uses this knowledge not in an effort to manipulate her daughter but to give her a skill and love that she will have to try to develop later. Instead, the daughter will develop this love at a young age and she will do so through the example of her mom. This scene is followed by mom and daughter pulling down their curls to demonstrate how long their hair is (0:45). When the daughter does not do it properly her mom says, “You gotta show them” (0:47). BeautyCutright is encouraging her daughter to show off her hair. I use “show off” to show with healthy pride how beautiful her hair is. A part of this mom’s political work is to get her daughter used to loving herself and her hair to the point that she is comfortable treasuring it in public. This kind of resistance to beauty norms is an important part of black women embracing their natural hair. Once again the mom insists, “you know you know how to

pull your hair,” then proceeds to do it for her (0:50). It is important to the mom that she says that her daughter knows how to do the things that she is asking her to do or know about her hair. The mom is also insisting that her daughter must know how to do what the mom is asking of her. It is somehow vital to her daughter’s experience as a black woman wearing her natural hair texture. Ultimately, the mother’s goal is to teach her daughter while she can how to take care of her hair as opposed to leaving her to struggle when she gets older and seek out the community that is already available to her at a young age. Ultimately, this mom is teaching her daughter how to resist. This scene ends with both women smiling as the mom shows off the length of both of their hair (1:00). This moment embodies the kind of love and confidence the mom wants to teach her daughter how to do. This is not to say that love and confidence is necessarily something that can be taught. But, it is something that black girls can learn by watching other black women love themselves and their hair. Political action and resistance takes place through intergenerational learning.

BeautyCutright decides to show her daughter how to do a simple twist-out, which she notes they will do it the same way and together but it will look different (2:00). The daughter is inexperienced and has a different hair texture than her mom so the end result will look different. What the mom was acknowledging was that it is the act of doing their hair together and the process of learning that is important and holds all the significance as opposed to how well her daughter is able to complete the style. It is also apparent that black women, including mother and daughter, will have their own individualized experiences with their hair. Really, the goal is about teaching her daughter to resist through the act of knowing how to take care of natural hair.

The music that is played in the background at points in the video add to the aspect of intergenerational learning that is taking place. The song's lyrics are, "Take my hand child, come with me" (6:25). The music fades in as mom and daughter stop talking and begin working on their hair (6:25). The song choice and placement of the music is very intentional. There most likely is no political intent, but the moment in which the song is placed reads as a journey that mom and daughter take together as the daughter navigates how to do her hair. The mom is asking her daughter to take her hand and trust her to teach her how to resist and maintain control over how she understands her hair.

BeautyCutright is also teaching her daughter to resist by showing her how to engage in community and share information with others. Once they are done twisting their hair, her daughter holds up the product she used in her hair and says that they completed the twists with "these products" (8:32). The daughter has become significantly less shy in front of the camera and now feels comfortable enough to add to the video. The information that she is offering is nothing new. The product was already introduced in an earlier part of the video (2:08). This moment is not about the information offered but the act itself. Her mom has not only taught her how to find community but how to engage in it as well. This too is an infrapolitical act. It is a part of larger acts of resistance against white supremacy.

The last component in this transfer of knowledge is affirmation and encouragement. BeautyCutright becomes excited about how well her daughter did her twists and talks about how she even curled them at the ends like she showed her (9:09). Reassuring her daughter that she did good work even though the result did not look quite like her mom's is important. It is hard enough for black women and black girls to have to

learn how to congratulate ourselves and speak self-affirmations in an effort to maintain confidence. BeautyCutright creates something akin to black girl love as she reinforces her daughter's positive opinions of herself.

This video also sparks some sort of awareness and desire among black women for a similar experience with their mom or elder black woman. Commenter Jessica DeAnna shares her experience with her mother. She describes being “thrown to the wolves” at age 10 when her hair was relaxed (a chemical process for straightening hair) and not knowing what to do with her hair (Jessica DeAnna). This then led a period in which her hair broke off and became very short (Jessica DeAnna). Commentor Jessica took this opportunity to express that she understands and sees a need for mothers to teach their daughters how to do their natural hair, perhaps how to do their hair in general. My explanation of Jessica's experience is not to extract some sort of blame or guilt from such experiences and place it on the shoulders of black women. The point of intergenerational learning is for black women to teach black girls how to do their hair. The knowledge gets passed down to help prevent experiences like Jessica's. This creates a legacy of resistance; generations of black women learn to resist those in power by understanding how to care for their natural hair. Unfortunately, Jessica's story is a part of the violence that black women experience as a result of their hair, it is a part of the violence that is being combatted by this Youtube community. This video does not only affect how BeautyCutright decides to raise her child, but also may spark ideas in other black women about teaching their daughters at a young age how to do their natural hair, that is if they have now discovered how to do it themselves. It is not as though people need a video to learn how to teach their daughter

how to do their hair. The video is more of a catalyst, meant to highlight the importance of teaching black girls how to be comfortable with their natural hair.

Conclusion

My work is supposed to demonstrate how black hair Youtube videos can be interpreted as infrapolitical acts that resist the hegemony white supremacy uses to oppress black women. The Welfare Queen is only one example of a trope that is used to control black women's bodies. Furthermore, its success is tied to many other tropes that are used to describe black women. I focused specifically on the welfare queen because through this trope it is clear that white supremacy is attacking black women's bodies and their sense of self in order to achieve a goal. This struggle and attack exists in other aspects of white supremacy as well. Thinking about the ways that black women survive and resist when faced with such an oppressive tactic is important. These are political acts that can go overlooked that contribute greatly to larger political movements. These women are engaging in political acts that are contributing to larger fights for autonomy over the body. It is important to push the argument beyond black hair as a political tool. This is a conversation about what a community of black women engaging in politics by taking care of their hair looks like. A community not defined by geographic proximity but experiential community online.

The self-love, struggle, and intergenerational learning that is manifested in this space has much wider implications. It expands beyond the Youtube community. Black women in these communities have to go to work and engage with coworkers, or they have to engage with friends and family. They are navigating spaces such as the grocery

store and the mall. They become beacons of resistance everywhere they go even when this is not recognized by those around them. They engage in everyday acts and their hair stands as a symbol of a community and relationship they share with other women as well as their own struggle and fight. These political acts are not a solution to the violence enacted on black women's bodies, but they are humanizing. Engaging with hair is both trauma and therapeutic. The black women that engage in these small acts of politics have made a decision to attempt to move past their trauma. This perhaps could invade other aspects of life. Learning how to love your black hair means a lot for learning how to love your blackness.

Youtube is most likely not the only way black women form communities around hair or communities in general. The internet has made sharing information and engaging with one another significantly easier. The themes that take place in the videos I have analyzed can most likely be found in other online forums and related to other topics. An expansion on my project could be interviewing black women to hear their own understanding of their relationship with their hair. The way that Robin Kelley and bell hooks describe political resistance is incredibly important to understanding many facets of black life and struggle. The body is a contested battle ground with autonomy and survival at stake. There is victory in this fight, and it is demonstrated in the joy of black hair tutorials on Youtube. Interrogating the way black women take care of ourselves can make us feel good. There is a lot of purpose in how we decide to do our hair beyond looking good. Looking good and feeling good about it is not superficial in black women, it is political.

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